

FACT SHEET
Agriculture
Sustainable Poplar farming
- providing a valuable future

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Farmed poplar cuttings



Poplars grown in an irrigation channel



Poplars for sale by the roadside



Poplars used for roof beams

PHOTO: POST CONFLICT REFORMS

Concept – subsistence farming provides little ability for a farmer to increase the worth of his crops year on year. The net value of wheat produced from a ½ jerib (1,000 sq m) of land is estimated at \$139 per annum. This can increase to \$250 if he grows hash and \$1,380 if he opts to grow poppies. However, if a farmer is assisted in taking a long term view, the value of farming poplars can equate to the equivalent of \$1,324 per a year, after seven years, and \$9,000 a year, when the poplars farmed and harvested at their optimum point - reaching heights of 60ft with girths of 40 – 50cm.

In the interim years, each wood lot is able to produce a steady annual income after year two from harvesting high quality hybrid poplar cuttings which can sustain the farmer until the mature wood is harvested with a value in the region of \$9,000 per jerib. Alternatively, if a farmer can afford to plant more poplars year on year, four jeribs of land planted annually at the rate of ½ jerib a year will enable the farmer to rotationally plant, maintain and harvest a ½ jerib of poplars per annum – equating to 64 times the value of an equivalent jerib of wheat.

The UNDP’s Afghanistan New Beginning’s Program’s (ANBP) DDR reintegration package provides no mid to long term assistance for former DDR combatants. (FC’s) beyond the short term assistance offered. Those FC’s, numbering 23,600, that selected the agricultural option received products worth \$700 that cost on average \$500 to implement, but provided little additional income for an FC, who was once paid by the MoD, to help support his family and fail to keep him busy. The family traditionally tend the crops and the animals. The 0.02% of those that chose the ANBP agriculture option and selected tree farming are now seeing the benefits but more awareness is required to promote the initiative to attract greater numbers and the private sector.

Tree farming initiatives that started as pilot projects in Pakistan and Tajikistan are now supplying the in country demand for roof beams, shuttering supports and fencing. It is hoped that the success of this modest project will be self evident and provide justification for a larger national program in due course to boost the income of DDR’d personnel currently farming low value crops or seeking a second chance.

FC’s are a critical group of people worthy of a \$142m UNDP ANBP DDR program that potentially pose a significant security risk if they are not provided with adequate assistance to help them earn sufficient income to meet their modest needs.

Assistance to Afghanistan (continued)

Background - Afghanistan was once famous for its unspoiled forests filled with woodland. An unbroken stretch of natural pistachio forests was reported to run across the north of the country, 300 year old cedars filled the mountain valleys in the east and even the arid hills to the south were timbered. The UN estimates that the forests could, at the current rate of consumption, be wiped out by 2030 – just 2.5% of the country remains forested.

This change occurred during the last thirty years when people were forced to use the wood to survive or were opportunists who knew that no one would prevent them from stripping and selling it. “Wood” lords discovered that lumbering high value cedar and walnut trees was comparable to profits obtained from the drug trade. Whilst morally and politically less attention grabbing, the legacy left behind can often be just as damaging. The community discovers that its livelihoods have been destroyed as the once rich environments are slowly subsumed by the ever encroaching desertification.

Reports from Kunar blame the timber mafias for the lawlessness being witnessed for fear that logging will be stopped if central government extends its influence. Hundreds of men are reportedly employed armed with chainsaws bribing local officials to allow camel trains to haul the timber into Pakistan. Elsewhere, in Samangan the dwindling pistachio forests are reducing the local communities incomes year on year. Once reliant on the value of the harvest raised on pistachio day – when the governor would declare open season and the community would respectfully wait before harvesting the nuts. Meanwhile, irresponsible armed men continue to cut down the trees for timber and communities grab what they can, when they can. Ben Arnold, from CSM, reported that the wood that fuels Kabul is becoming increasingly sparse and lumberers are being forced higher and higher into the increasingly bare mountains. Comparing satellite imagery from 1977 to 2002 confirms that the most forested parts of the country have lost 52% of the once famous oak and conifer forests. Tree farming for construction products or fuel is therefore essential for the economic and environmental health of the County.

Implementing partner - GPFA is an NGO that aims to improve livelihoods of farmers by providing assistance for up to two years with the initial cost of planting trees whilst providing mid to long term technical support thereby generating sustainable jobs, income and environmental benefits.

GPFA has trailed 25 different types of hybrid poplars in Shomlai for the last two years of which four specimens have been selected as they thrived in the local conditions and produce trees that grew twice as fast as the local species. The trees will as hybrids only be farmed on private land. Poplars do not grow readily from seed and are unlikely to spread naturally into the local environment and are therefore not part of the wider initiative to “green Afghanistan”.

Twenty FC’s that have been formally DDR’d through the UNDP ANBP program have been selected to form two clusters of ten in Shomali and Logar. Those selected demonstrated that they own at least a ½ jerib of land each – to ensure a landlord is not able to recover the land and the trees at a later date, that it meets GPFA’s minimal land quality standard, has access to irrigation systems and have been confirmed by the Shura as someone with limited earnings and in agreement that they will repay GPFA with replacement tree cuttings in the following year.

Day to day, tree cuttings are grown at 1m intervals with cuttings grown at 50cm intervals. Side cuttings are used for fuel and pruned to direct energy to the main plant. Poor trees are thinned to leave a wood lot with straight specimens. The farmers agree upon commencement that they will repay cuttings from their own production 12 months later.

It is hoped that the success of this modest project will be self evident and provide justification for a larger national program in due course to boost the income of DDR’d personnel currently farming low value crops or seeking a second chance. Richard Scarth March 2006. Further detailed information is available on www.ddragf.com